

## **“Cast Those Nets Again!”**

Sermon: Year C, Epiphany 5

Text: Luke 5:1–11

Preached: February 10, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

O God of steadfast love and faithfulness, let us hear your call today. AMEN

Have you ever been doing something that you’ve done many, many times before, something you think you’re pretty expert at, something you can do almost with your eyes closed, and realize that it’s suddenly not working for you? Or you discover that something that has always been routine and reliable and fruitful just isn’t productive anymore? I had that experience in a small way on New Year’s Eve, when we invited some good friends over for dinner. I had made all the preparations. I had decided to keep it simple by making dishes that I had made numerous times before, dishes that were my fail-safes. That morning, I cooked up a pot of my famous cream of mushroom soup, and stashed it in the refrigerator, ready to simply pull out a little before dinner and heat back through. In the afternoon, I seasoned a rack of pork with a salt and herb crust, all set to go into the roasting pan at the right time. Dessert was made, potatoes went on to boil at just the right time, green beans all set to steam. This was going to be an easy entertaining night. And I don’t know what happened, but nothing went right. The roast just wasn’t cooking. The guests were starting to fill up on cheese and crackers, so I figured, let’s go do the soup course now while we wait for the roast. The soup, which felt hot when I ladled it out into the bowls, turned out to be barely tepid when we began to eat it. Imagine, if you will, lukewarm mushroom soup. I went out to the kitchen where the mashed potatoes were beginning to thicken as they kept warm on the back burner by the stove vent. I had started the green beans, which were at their perfection point, only to discover that the stupid roast still wasn’t done. Hello, limp green beans. Finally, I just pulled the roast from the oven, and decided a little bit of pink was OK. We cut into the pork, and with the first bite realized it was too salty. My image of myself as a good cook took a decided hit that night. The funny thing is, though, I did everything just the way I had always done it, and it had always worked before. I was discouraged.

I imagine that that’s sort of the way Simon Peter feels when he and his partners, James and John, pull their boats back up to the shore after spending the entire night out fishing, trawling heavy nets through the waters of Lake Gennesaret, which we most often call the Sea of Galilee. All night long, these men who made their living fishing had done what they always did: They cast their twine nets from their low-gunned boats, then rowed, straining against the oars until their muscles ached, expecting that at least a passable load of fish would be caught up in the net. Yet each time they stopped and began to haul those heavy, wet nets back into the boat, they cursed as they discovered that there was nothing in them. Nary a minnow. Over and over again, they cast those nets, dragging them, hauling them in...and still, nothing. It just isn’t happening. At some point, exasperated, exhausted, they decide to call it a night. As the sun rises, they row back to shore, and under the now-morning skies, they step out knee-deep into the cool water and began to scrub their nets to clean off the silt and debris trapped in the cords so they can hang them to dry for the next night. They notice this man on the shore, surrounded by a motley throng of people pressing to get close to him. Simon recognizes Jesus, because Jesus just days before had come into Simon’s house in Capernaum and had healed his mother-in-law of a fever that had put her in bed. Simon had had a moment of thinking “Wow, that’s pretty cool that he could do that,” but the encounter hadn’t really had much more effect than that. He nods a bit to acknowledge Jesus, then turns his attention back to his task, wondering why what usually worked had yielded nothing. But mostly, he’s tired, worn out, and just wants to get home to sleep through the day so he can head out again the next night. The last thing he wants to do is to sit and listen to some preacher, even though he thinks the guy is pretty OK.

And the next thing he knows, this Jesus guy has climbed into his boat, and is talking to him, telling him that he wants Simon to get back in the boat and to row him out a little bit so he can get a little distance to talk to his audience. “Are you kidding me?” he thinks. “Seriously?” But he figures he owes the guy something. After all, he did heal his mother-in-law. So he sighs a bit, thinks, “There goes my nap,” and rows out some. He rests his head on the oar as Jesus sits down, thinking to himself, “Oh, brother, here goes. Let’s make this quick, Jesus. I’m exhausted.” In spite of himself, though, he listens as Jesus talks to the crowd, intrigued, but keeping his distance. Finally, Jesus wraps it up, and Simon thinks, “OK, now I can go home and rest up so I can do this all over again.” But Jesus has another idea. Simon gets a little annoyed when Jesus tells him to go back out onto the lake to cast his nets in deep water. He knows it’s pointless. He knows what he’s doing, and the fish just aren’t there. And now he’s going to have to get his nets wet and dirty again, all for nothing, just because this

Jesus guy is telling him to. What does this guy possibly know about fishing? And he's not telling them to do anything that they haven't already tried...no new gimmick, no new technique. What could possibly be different this time? We've done this already, Jesus. But tired as he is, Simon agrees. He grabs some of his helpers, and they row out where it's deeper. Just to humor Jesus, they cast the net...and now, the net that all night long had come up empty time and time again is straining against the load of fish that have found their way into it.

Simon whistles for his partners, James and John, to get into their boat and to row out to help him. They pull alongside, and grab one side of the net, and together they bring the fish up to the surface, scooping them into the two boats, piling these flopping fish on top of one another until the weight of them has the boats riding so low in the water that it threatens to sink them. Now Simon is completely freaked out, to the point that he's afraid to be in the presence of this Jesus guy. He suddenly realizes that he's standing in the presence of something, someone, with a power he doesn't understand, and the encounter scares him, because he doesn't feel worthy of it...and maybe because he realizes that everything is about to change. He tells Jesus, "Get away from me, please. I can't deal with this. You definitely do not need people like me around." Jesus tells him, "Don't be afraid"—a central theme of Luke's Gospel—and tells him that now, instead of fish, he's going to be catching people. And they row back to shore, and Simon and his buddies leave their boats and nets behind, and set out to follow Jesus.

See, I think we often encounter the Holy One in those moments in our lives when everything we've normally done suddenly isn't working the way it's supposed to. It may be in our personal relationships, or our vocations, even in our spiritual lives. In spite of our planning, in spite of our expertise, in spite of us doing exactly what we have done the same way for years, we suddenly reach those moments when it simply isn't working anymore. We keep trying and trying, but all we really do is butt our heads against a wall and wear ourselves out. We begin to think it's all pointless. Then we encounter the Holy One, clambering over the edge of our boat and saying, "Hey, row me out there." We may have encountered him before, and may feel some sense of obligation to listen, to respond. And we may respond grudgingly, thinking, "OK, God, you get this one more chance, and then we're done." And then God surprises us. The ordinary suddenly takes on fresh meaning.

I think congregations experience the same thing. We gather and do the same thing week after week, month after month, year after year. What once worked no longer seems to be working. Our nets come up empty, and we get discouraged, ready to hang up our nets and head home. We know who Jesus is, of course, but we don't really see how that has anything to do with us personally. But you see, I think if we stop to pay attention to Jesus, to engage with him, to row back out onto the lake at his insistence, even though we are thinking, "We've tried this before, this is NOT going to work," we may very well be surprised that the deepened presence of Jesus in our activity may be the element that transforms our routine into something that brings forth an abundant catch. A deepened encounter with Jesus in our personal and communal lives, a willingness to try things simply because we believe that this is what Jesus is calling us to do and because we feel we can trust him, those are the things that can transform our fruitless efforts into something lifegiving.

This "abundant catch of fish" thing is not about "we need more butts in the pews, so let's get out there and catch people." This abundant catch is about encountering the Holy One, then being so transformed by that encounter that we want to draw others into that experience. When we gather for worship, when we do things for our neighbors, when we open our doors to the hungry and the cold, when we share one another's burdens, when we speak up for the voiceless and oppressed, when we welcome the stranger, we are casting our nets. The purpose of casting our nets is not to perpetuate and grow an institution, it is to draw others into an experience of the Holy, to help others to know God's goodness and God's mercy and justice, to help others live lives free of guilt and shame and fear, lives that change the world through simple, everyday acts of kindness and love.

Jesus meets us in our "stuck" places, and the encounter with him can transform us. So get back in the boat, tired as you may be, discouraged as you may sometimes be, and cast those nets of love. It doesn't matter who you are, how worthy or unworthy you may be, whether you really believe that this Jesus can change things or not... just row, cast the nets again, and open yourself to the possibility of something surprising, and abundant. Thanks be to God. AMEN